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Contents

Aufsätze – Articles – Articles

Honghua Poizat-Xie

Quelques réflexions sur la traduction littéraire du chinois vers les langues européennes — 1

Alex Payette

Le retour de l'académie impériale dans la construction de la société harmonieuse: Le Hall des études nationales du devenir vertueux — 19

Jonas Rüegg

Aimé Humbert – Wertvorstellungen eines Bourgeois und das Japan der Bakumatsu-Zeit — 47

Henning Sievert

Der Schutzvertrag von Raqqa und die Verlautbarung von Mosul. Ein Beitrag zur Diskussion über den „Islamischen Staat im Irak und in Syrien“ — 73

Johannes Thomann

Al-Fārābīs Kommentar zum Almagest in sekundärer Überlieferung bei Ibn aṣ-Ṣalāḥ: Ein vorläufiger Bericht — 99

Tilman Trausch

Die Basis der Erzählung. Das historische Detail in der persischen Historiographie des 16. Jahrhunderts — 115

Special Section: The Chinese Communist Party and the Politicization of Traditions

Ralph Weber, Simona Grano and Philipp Hetmanczyk

Introduction — 157

Philipp Hetmanczyk

Party Ideology and the Changing Role of Religion: From “United Front” to “Intangible Cultural Heritage” — 165

André Laliberté

The Politicization of Religion by the CCP: A Selective Retrieval — 185

Nele Noesselt

Relegitimizing the Chinese Party-State: “Old” Sources of Modern Chinese Party Power — 213

Giorgio Strafella

“Marxism” as Tradition in CCP Discourse — 235

Rezensionen – Comptes rendus – Reviews

Roland Altenburger

Cao, Juan: *In der Sackgasse oder auf dem Weg zu einem neuen Paradigma? Die Erforschung des Romans Der Traum der roten Kammer (Rotologie) im 21. Jahrhundert* — 255

Andrea Riemenschnitter

Conermann, Stephan (Hg.): *Was ist Kulturwissenschaft? Zehn Antworten aus den »Kleinen Fächern«* — 263

Nadejda Lebedeva

Graf, Matthias: *Mazzikā! Eine arabistisch-ethnomusikologische Exkursion in die Text- und Klangwelten der Popmusik Ägyptens und des Libanon von ihren Anfängen bis heute* — 271

Silvia Naef

Fr. Marcos A. Marcos/Helen Moussa/Carolyn M. Ramzy: *Marguerite Nakhla, Legacy to Modern Egyptian Art* — 279

Stephen Eskildsen

Reiter, Florian C.: *Man, Nature and the Infinite: The Scope of Taoist Thunder Magic Rituals* — 285

Viatcheslav Vetrov

Rosner, Erhard: *Leitzeichen des Imperiums: Programmatische Ortsnamen in der Geschichte Chinas* — 289

Nele Noesselt

Relegitimizing the Chinese Party-State: “Old” Sources of Modern Chinese Party Power

Abstract: This article discusses the recent renaissance of political Confucianism under the fourth and fifth generations of Chinese political leaders. By conducting a context-sensitive analysis of references to pre-modern state philosophy and political symbolism in official political statements, it argues that the seemingly “Confucian” turn in Chinese politics should rather be interpreted as a strategic element of the PRC’s ongoing legitimization campaign and its leaders’ quest to consolidate the power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). While philosophical reflections and popular Confucianism are flourishing all over the country, political Confucianism as operationalized by the CCP remains clearly restricted to moral aspects of political rule and thus mainly defines abstract principles of good governance and harmonious order. Structural Confucianism as developed by Jiang Qing has so far not been included into the party’s official (administrative) reform agenda.

Keywords: harmony, invented traditions, legitimacy, political Confucianism, Xi-Li administration

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1 Relegitimizing the Chinese Party-State: “Old” sources of modern Chinese party power

Reference to “harmony” – “Harmonious Society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), “Harmonious World” (*hexie shijie* 和谐世界) – and quotations from the Chinese classics in official political statements by core leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of the fourth generation have widely been interpreted as

an indicator for the political rehabilitation of “Confucian” ideas and values.¹ While certain groups of intellectuals in China are advocating a “Confucianization” of the CCP and, as Jiang Qing, have called for a new institutional order based on “political Confucianism”,² one should, however, not forget that this assumed “Confucian turn” has never been formally confirmed by the CCP. Official party documents stress the strategic importance of traditional values and culture without singling out any particular religious or intellectual stream of thought. However, whether this has changed under the fifth generation has not yet been studied.

While most interpretations of the current “Confucian renaissance” in Chinese politics focus on visible actions – such as the temporary erection of a Confucius statue on Tian’anmen Square (2011) or the opening of “Confucius Institutes”³ – this paper will dive beyond the surface of observable actions by undertaking an in-depth analysis of official speeches and party documents to decrypt the fifth generation’s conceptual stance towards political Confucianism. Xi Jinping’s official speeches during his visits to Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius, in 2013 and 2014 and his keynote speech at the opening of the Fifth Congress of the International Confucian Association (2014) could be expected to shed some light on the CCP’s current interpretation of Confucian political thought and the relevance ascribed to it in the context of the CCP’s governance philosophy. The paper therefore starts with a historical-hermeneutical deconstruction of these speeches. The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How do Xi Jinping’s speeches refer to (political) Confucianism or other Chinese philosophical traditions?
- (2) What drives the CCP’s new concern about pre-modern ideas and philosophical traditions?

To answer the second question, the article will have to put the findings derived from the analysis of Xi’s speeches into the broader context of party politics under the fifth generation. If pre-modern political philosophy plays a central function in the Chinese party-state’s governance strategy, this should somehow be mirrored in the CCP’s recent policy declarations. The article concludes with a discussion of the causal relationship between the reinvention of ideology, including elements of ancient state philosophy, and the current efforts to re-legitimize and re-stabilize the Chinese one-party system.

1 Billioud 2007; Bell 2008.

2 Jiang, Qing 2003.

3 Cheung 2012: 31.

2 Political Confucianism revisited

Given the fact that the May-Fourth-Movement and the Cultural Revolution referred to Confucius as a personification of everything evil,⁴ as most prominently marked by the campaign to “Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius” 批林批孔运动, the assumed symbolic rehabilitation of Confucius seems a rather paradoxical event, irreconcilable with party orthodoxy. The confusion about the revival of (political) Confucianism, observable on Chinese microblogs reflecting the Chinese government’s new cultural (and religious) policies, and open resistance from the camp of Mao-Marxist hardliners force China’s political leaders to pursue a rather incremental re-arrangement of the various sub-frames of CCP ideology. There is still no inner-party consensus with regard to the “correct” handling of “ancient”, especially “Confucian”, symbols and ideas. While one can only speculate about the driving factors and strategic calculations behind the erection of the ten meter tall Confucius statue on Tian’anmen Square in January 2011, the silent relocation of this statue in April 2011 clearly outlines the ongoing intra-factional struggles inside the CCP.⁵

Given that post-Maoist politics operate with the principle of collective leadership and generally seek to reach a compromise between the competing factions, a big bang readjustment of the CCP’s management of cultural, philosophical and religious issues that might destabilize this only temporarily achieved consensus is rather unlikely. Wen Jiabao’s open criticism of the disastrous excesses of the Cultural Revolution and his decisive statement that there will never be a revival of this movement⁶ – indirectly thus also condemning the “Chongqing Model” and retro-Maoist groups of China’s New Left⁷ – stands for a gradualist, experimental rehabilitation strategy of “Chinese” traditional values.⁸ At a first glance, Xi Jinping’s visits to the place of origin of Confucianism in China – Confucius’ hometown Qufu with its Confucian temple and the Confucian Academy – in 2013 and 2014 appear as a move away from the so far rather silently pursued incremental reactivation of pre-modern governance philosophy. A closer look, however, leaves no doubt that Xi does not deviate from the CCP’s earlier approach to governance theory and the related strategy of “using the past to serve the present”. Confucian thought serves as a treasure trove to define

4 On this campaign, see inter alia Chang 1974; Gregor/Chang 1979; Goldman 1975.

5 It is more than self-evident that the erection and relocation of the statue would not have been possible without the political authorities’ official consent, see also Weber 2013.

6 Renminwang (14-03-2012).

7 Freeman/Wen 2011.

8 On Wen’s special reference to Confucian ideas, see Billoud 2007: 54.

“new” basic patterns of governance that do not copy any other political system but are said to be directly derived from China’s own past.

During his visit to Qufu in November 2013, Xi Jinping reportedly met with researchers from the Confucius Research Institute and announced his intention to study two of their new compilations carefully: *The General Interpretation of Family Sayings of Confucius* 孔子家语通解 and the *Interpretation of the Analects* 论语诠解 edited by Yang Chaoming.⁹ Yang, director of the Confucius Research Institute, explains the main ideas behind these two exegeses and hermeneutical text analyses as follows: Confucian ideas, according to his understanding, should be regarded as universal concepts equal in importance and ranking to those of the core philosophers of ancient “Western” state philosophy such as Plato or Socrates. Confucianism, however, as Yang stresses, contains more than mere patterns of strategic governance and justification of political power. It shapes the normative values and belief systems of the Chinese society and thus defines the ground on which socialist ideas could be planted. If it is correct to assume that Confucian ideas are internalized beliefs and value patterns, Marxism-Leninism or Mao Zedong Thought did never permanently replace traditional Chinese philosophy but only gained temporary discursive superiority over these old “Confucian” frames. This implies that the recent Confucian turn should not be read as a denial of Marxism-Leninism but as a cyclically occurring variation of the ratio of ingredients composing the ideational patterns of Chinese politics. Yang’s reinterpretation of Confucianism does not focus on the level of institutions. Instead he highlights abstract moral ideas such as self-cultivation and self-restriction.¹⁰

Revealing and illuminating as these statements are, they do not contain any hint what functions reactivated “Confucian” elements might fulfil. Confucian moral philosophy contains both statements on moral self-cultivation as well as on social relationships. Translated into modern terminology, the latter includes patterns and principles of interaction between the party-state and society as well as between the party and the country’s bureaucratic administration staff. What motivates the public staging of Xi’s turn to ancient Chinese political thought? Is the CCP looking for concrete measures of governing the country or do these “Confucian” elements remain abstract, theoretical-ideological frames without direct implications for political practice?

According to the Chinese newspaper coverage of Xi’s 2013 visit to Qufu, Xi not only underlined the relevance of old Confucian thought for the present and

⁹ Li, Gong 2013.

¹⁰ Parts of the interview with Yang Chaoming concerning his meeting with Xi Jinpings are available online: <http://www.confucius.gov.cn/Item/2382.aspx> (10/10/2014).

future development of China, but also identified Confucianism as an essential corner stone of Sinicized Marxism. Confucian ideas and Marxism are thus not conceived of as antagonist streams of thought, but as symbiotic, mutually inspiring intellectual experiments.¹¹ Research on Confucianism, following Xi's explanations, should be guided by historical materialism and remain linked to the overarching framework of (Chinese) Marxism. Given this tight connection between (Mao-)Marxism and "old" Chinese traditions, the CCP becomes, at least in Xi's retrospective assessment, the wholehearted defender and promoter of Chinese cultural traditions:

Since its establishment, the CCP has been the faithful inheritor and promoter of China's ancient culture. The CCP is also an active advocate and developer of China's modern advanced culture.¹²

Xi's official reappraisal of China's "ancient culture", which comprises more than just Confucianism, and his efforts to reconcile CCP ideology with pre-modern state philosophy do, however, not represent a U-turn in modern party politics. The origin of the above-quoted sentence can be traced back to the declarations of the 6th plenary session of the 17th Central Committee (October 2011), i.e. to the second period in office of the Hu-Wen administration.¹³

Like Wen Jiabao before, Xi openly condemned the destruction of the Chinese society's ethical and moral foundations during the Cultural Revolution. Along this line, his turn to "old" sources and traditions becomes linked to the Chinese party-state's ongoing efforts to invent a novel reference scheme for the highly pluralized post-Maoist society. Apart from Maoist mass movements, Xi also openly blamed "Western" capitalism for causing a general decline of morality and a loss of orientation. Indirectly, Xi thus reconfirmed the (post-Maoist) PRC's claim to practice a governance model *sui generis* that is based on its own norms and values. Another key symbolic move by Xi Jinping was his visit to Beijing University, the birthplace of the New Cultural Movement, on May 4, 2014. Over the Maoist decades, commemoration of the May-Fourth-Movement was often linked to revolutionary, patriotic mobilization of the Chinese youth. Later on, in the reform period, it was mentioned in connection with China's ongoing quest

11 On Chinese scholars' efforts to come to a synthesis of Marxism and Confucianism, see Billioud 2007: 56–57.

12 Excerpts from this speech and a context-related analysis can be found in the online edition of the Hong Kong newspaper *Dagongbao* (12-02-2014).

13 For the report of the meeting, see <http://china.huanqiu.com/roll/2011-10/2095239.html> (10/10/2014).

for modernity, technological innovation and national renewal.¹⁴ This time, Xi demonstratively met with Tang Yijie 汤一介, one of the university's most outstanding specialists for pre-modern Chinese philosophy, thus signalling a final abandonment of "revolutionary" party politics.¹⁵

This farewell to revolution is not just discernible in domestic politics. With regard to world affairs, through relying on *Confucian* Marxist ideas, as Xi argues, China has a chance to expand its (Confucian) "soft power" 软实力 and to increase its "say" 话语权 in global politics.¹⁶ "Confucian" symbols and slogans are used as confidence-building measures to generate trust in and support for China in multilateral bargaining contexts, as they help to generate the positive image of China as a peaceful and cooperative power and hence defuse threat perceptions.¹⁷

Xi's efforts to reactivate "old" "Chinese" mind maps of governance obviously resonate with his reconfirmation of the necessity to educate Chinese students in the Chinese classics and ancient philosophical writings, as expressed in his now widely quoted speech at Beijing Normal University on September 9, 2014: "De-sinicization is not something to celebrate. Classics should be embedded into students' minds, and become the 'genes' of Chinese culture".¹⁸ The promotion of pre-modern Chinese thought and philosophical traditions seems to continue along the lines defined by the fourth generation in the 2006 Plan for Cultural Development and contributes to the construction of a joint "Chinese" national identity for the post-Maoist period.¹⁹

Xi's "Confucianization" (or rather "re-sinification") of the CCP reached its climax with his speech at the occasion of the Fifth Congress of the International Confucian Association (September 24, 2014), also the 2565th anniversary of Confucius, held in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Xi talked about the impact and continuing influence of Confucian ideas on China's national identity and the conduct of Chinese politics. The term "socialism" appears only once in the whole text:

Members of the Communist Party of China are Marxists, who uphold the scientific theories of Marxism, and adhere to and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics. But Chinese communists are neither historical nihilists, nor cultural nihilists. We always believe that the basic principles of Marxism must be closely married to the concrete reality of China,

¹⁴ The legacy of May Fourth has been outlined by Schwarcz 1986.

¹⁵ For a short curriculum vitae, see: <http://baike.baidu.com/view/104074.htm> (10/10/2014).

¹⁶ *Dagongbao* 2014.

¹⁷ Shih 1993; Li, Chenyang 2014.

¹⁸ Sina (24-09-2014).

¹⁹ Billioud 2007.

and that we should approach traditional native culture and cultures of all countries in a scientific manner, and arm ourselves with all outstanding cultural achievements humanity has created.²⁰

This statement leaves no doubt that Marxism will remain the basic fundament of the CCP's legitimation strategy. Chinese socialism, or, in orthodox terminology, "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is not just the outcome of the adaptation of Marxist ideas to the historical and structural conditions of China, it also includes cultural constants.

Xi's speech mirrors the ongoing efforts undertaken by the CCP to define a new ideological reference frame that prescribes certain value patterns and principles of moral behaviour. In 2011, i.e. under the fourth generation, the 6th Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee – which, as depicted above, also redefined the CCP as promoter of "ancient" Chinese thought – adopted the "Decision on Deepening the Reform of the Cultural System and Promoting the Development of Socialist Culture" (*Zhong Gong Zhongyang guanyu shenhua wenhua tizhi gaige tuidong shehuizhuyi wenhua fazhan da fanrong ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding* 中共中央关于深化文化体制改革推动社会主义文化大发展大繁荣若干重大问题的决定)²¹, which implicitly documented the importance of the ideational level of legitimacy for the reconsolidation and survival of the one-party system.

3 Confucianism and "Moral" governance

The CCP's re-invented and re-interpreted political Confucianism²² generally consists of two dimensions: A moral-ethical one, which is linked to social order or social hierarchy and prescribes basic principles of correct behaviour, and another one that stands for the bureaucratic-administrative institutional backbones of the political system.

In times when Confucianism served as a state ideology, the imperial civil service examination system "tested" and secured the ideological conformity and the political loyalty of those applying to become part of the bureaucratic apparatus. Although the fifth generation of political leaders did not restore the old Confucian examination system, the work style of party-cadres has recently

²⁰ Xinhua (24-09-2014).

²¹ The decisions are available online: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2011-10/25/c_122197737.htm.

²² On the ex post (re-)imagination and (re-)configuration of traditions, see Hobsbawm 1992.

become evaluated based on symbolic principles that show many resemblances to Confucian moral philosophy. Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign thus presents itself not as an import of "Western" patterns of transparency, accountability, rule of law and checks-and-balances, but as a Chinese version of "transparent government".²³ In June 2013, Xi officially launched a mass line campaign to secure ideological synchronization.²⁴ Xi summarized this campaign, originally designed to expire after one year, at a final party meeting on the mass line in October 2014.²⁵ His speech is full of direct and indirect quotations taken from the Chinese classics and ancient Chinese state philosophy. Among them are quotations from Wei Zheng's political recommendations to Tang emperor Taizong: "If one wants a tree to grow, one must treat its roots, if one wants a river to run far, one must dredge its source" (求木之长者，必固其根本；欲流之远者，必浚其泉源 *Qiu mu zhi zhang zhe, bi gu qi genben; yu liu zhi yuan zhe, bi jun qi quanyuan*). The original text then continues "if one wants the state to be stable and peaceful, one must strengthen its moral virtues" (思国之安者，必积其德义 *si guo zhi an, bi ji qi de yi*) – it is striking that this last part of the sentence is not directly quoted in Xi's speech but reverberates among those cadres in the audience familiar with the basics of Chinese state philosophy. Those trained in Mao-Marxism and de-trained from "old" state philosophy get the reinterpreted passage from the following passages of the speech where Xi talks about the necessity of morality and loyalty. Wang Can, philosopher and political advisor during Han dynasty, is then quoted to present Xi's mass line self-criticism campaign²⁶ imposed on the party as a continuation of old practices: "one has to look in the mirror to prevent that spots remain, one has to listen to criticism in order to avoid sticking to wrong behaviours" (观于明镜，则瑕疵不滞于躯；听于直言，则过行不累乎身 *Guan yu ming jing, ze xiaci bu zhi yu qu; ting yu zhi yan, ze guoxing bu lei yu shen*).

What all these direct (though sometimes slightly modified) quotations have in common is that they are generally not taken from the Confucian (or other religious-philosophical canonized) classics, but are drawn from the Chinese

²³ The official "Work Regulations for Leading Party and Government Cadre Promotions and Appointments" 党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例 can be found online: http://news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao/2003-01/18/content_695422_1.htm (10/10/2014).

²⁴ Xinhua (18-06-2013).

²⁵ Sohu (08-10-2014).

²⁶ One of those self-criticism campaigns took place in connection with Xi's visit to Hebei province and his meeting with local party officials, see *South China Morning Post* (26-09-2013); *Global Times* (27-09-2013).

“mirrors of princes”, dynastical records as well as ancient writings on ruling strategies.²⁷

4 Old political notions and Confucian Re-Marx

In the early years of the Maoist PRC, “old” ideational reference frames had become substituted by “modern” ideological terms and concepts imported from the Soviet Union, which were later on adapted to the Chinese conditions. This canonized monolithic complex of Mao Zedong Thought served as the overall reference frame for party politics until the country’s entrance into the reform era, when novel ideas were added to the official party canon: Deng Xiaoping Theory, Jiang Zemin’s Three Representations, Hu Jintao’s concept of Scientific Development and his Harmonious Society/Harmonious World paradigm and, quite recently, Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream.²⁸ All these notions target issues of governance ranging from the role and representational function of the CCP up to state-society interactions as such. By transferring concrete political issues to a rather abstract, symbolic level, the CCP establishes theory frames and terms that guide and determine the way people can refer to the party-state’s political rule. It is more than obvious that the first add-ons to Mao Zedong Thought had to justify the inclusion of capitalism and market structures into the centrally managed state economy while upholding the party’s exclusive power monopoly. Moreover, the political elites tried to prevent the formation of oppositional structures beyond the reach and control of the CCP by extending the party’s representation claims to also include China’s private entrepreneurs and the intellectual elites.²⁹ Both groups had, at least in Maoist times, formerly been regarded as enemies of the people, which once more illustrates the pragmatic resilience of the Chinese one-party system over the past few years. Apart from this conceptual re-definition of the party and the political and economic structures of the Chinese system as such, the slogans coined by the fourth and fifth generation of political leaders undertake an unexpected, rather counter-iconoclast step by using select terms and

²⁷ This interpretation of the mass line campaign and its roots in “ancient” state philosophy is based on a close reading of Xi’s speech (08-10-2014) and data base searches for the origins of these reference texts as well as on the interpretation of Xi’s reactivation of ancient thought compiled by Xinhua (09-10-2014).

²⁸ The Renmin Ribao’s webportal maintains a page that presents a collection of selected articles dealing with the theoretical underpinnings and the official definition of the “Chinese Dream”, see <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40557/359404/index.html>.

On the concept’s origins and its integration into the CCP’s ideological toolbox, see Fewsmith 2013: 3–4.

²⁹ On the party’s incorporation of the new capitalist class, see Dickson 2003.

notions of the Confucian classics as inspiration and conceptual sources for China's modern statecraft. On the visible level of officially sanctioned governance terminology the remembrance of China's philosophical and cultural heritage is invoked by the new reference to "harmony".³⁰ Neither the "Harmonious Society" nor the "Harmonious World" are "old" Chinese frames.³¹ Nonetheless, these terms re-activate abstract patterns of Chinese thinking on harmonious interactions and imaginations of harmonious order as such.

Utopian dreams of social harmony and world peace are two central *topoi* in political philosophy all over the globe. However, the models developed by Chinese political strategists to serve the stabilization of modern Chinese power undoubtedly display the impact of political culture on the coining of governance philosophy. The notion of harmony, which was and is quite central to Confucian state philosophy, should not be confused or mixed with the "Western" understanding of this term. Harmony does not mean equality, but stands for harmony in a hierarchical system whose operations are based on reciprocal duties and responsibilities. That is why the notion of "Harmonious Society" does not *ex ante* exclude the existence of tensions and conflicts (or even the use of force).³² Harmony, in this reading, stands for the stabilization and maintenance of the "right" and "legitimate" order, which no one – not even the Chinese emperor, as his mandate (of heaven) was bound to the condition that he performed the rituals in order perpetually re-iterate the cosmos-world-individual order – is allowed to overthrow.³³

The external and internal threats and shocks the Chinese system has to face might vary over time. But the strategies to re-legitimize the governance claims of the ruler (or the ruling elite) are timeless. What has changed is the structure of the Chinese society, the degree of self-organization as well as the technical means that enable nation- (and world-)wide communication and exchange of information. This leads to a pluralism of ideas and concepts both inside the Chinese society as well as among its political elites and their advisors. Given the unsolved, potentially lethal developmental challenges and uncertainties of

30 For the various dimensions of harmony as a key term in Chinese political rhetoric, see Guo/Guo 2008.

31 Just to illustrate this point: Yan Xuetong's research of pre-modern Chinese state philosophy is guided by the idea that "studying pre-Qin interstate thought is not to understand the past so much as to draw lessons for the present, especially for the great task of China's rise [...] A study of pre-Qin interstate political philosophy may provide guidance for Chinese foreign policy as well as for the world", see Yan 2011: 203–204.

32 On "Confucian" harmony and the legitimization of the use of force, see Shih 1993; Li, Chenyang 2014.

33 The basic patterns of traditional modes of legitimacy in China and their integration into the CCP's legitimization strategy have been examined in detail by Guo 2003.

China's high-speed modernization process, the fourth and fifth generations of political leaders have initiated a set of reforms that bear the potential of overthrowing the party-state's old (revolutionary) identity. China's new reform leaders thus do not only have to convince the Chinese people to accept and support the re-structuring of the Chinese political economy, but they simultaneously have to secure backing from inside the party. One way to do so is to operate with terms that are open for further definition and serve as empty signifiers upon which the different groups can project their specific ideas and interests. In this vein, the "Chinese Dream" might make China's military hardliners believe that the fifth generation now follows a more assertive, self-confident positioning strategy as outlined earlier in a best-selling book sold under the title "The Chinese Dream".³⁴ Others, however, could expect the new leaders to push for social equality and to restore social harmony. Along this line, the notion would stand for a commitment to sustainability and the old post-Mao formula of a well-off society. Due to the concept's ambiguity, or even polyvalence, it fulfils the function of integrating and incorporating the most divergent inner-Chinese groups under one overarching terminological roof.

Given the current political circumstances, one could argue that the "Chinese Dream" is a poor copy of the "American Dream" and probably thought to unite the people behind the CCP in times of increasing socio-economic tensions, erupting in offline and online mass protests, as well as ethnic-religious conflicts and separatist movements. The Chinese party-state's recent efforts to re-invent Chinese history and culture as basic sources for future modes of governance suggest a different interpretation. If the Chinese party-state operates with the element of "difference" and "uniqueness", the "Chinese Dream" should not be taken as a repetition of the "American Dream" but as a counter-model, which might inspire other states, regions, or even whole civilizations. The notion thus fulfils a dual function: With regard to the Chinese people(s), it exerts its power of symbolic inclusion, whereas with regard to the world, it makes a clear statement that the PRC follows its distinct model of development and is not going to duplicate any of the existing paths practiced by modern nation-states in the "West".³⁵ If there is no external forerunner or blueprint for China's development, China's "old" (re-invented and re-interpreted) state philosophy along with political historiography provide the only formally allowed inspiration for contemporary governance innovations.

In political practice, however, it is more than obvious that the PRC as a learning and adapting modern one-party state reflects both the history of events

³⁴ Liu 2010. For a discussion of Liu's dream, see Callahan 2012.

³⁵ Zhang 2012.

and the theorization of politics as done by and in other political systems to develop its own canon of state philosophy and political strategy for the 21st century.³⁶

The “new” blueprints and theoretical pathways for the Chinese party-state’s future orientation are not just the final outcome of inner-elite debates and their observation of the success and failure of other one- and also multi-party systems. The reanimation of “Confucianism”, as a general guidance and reference frame for Chinese politics, also responds to the perceived religious renaissance, i.e. the new centrality of religion and religious philosophy in people’s daily live. This emerging religious sphere could easily get out of control of the Chinese party-state and trigger the formation of *de facto* political organizations beyond the official one-party structures.

5 Developmental challenges and the limits of revolutionary party ideology

Research on the Chinese political system oscillates between the two paradigms of system failure/transformation toward democracy³⁷ versus pragmatic resilience/system survival.³⁸ Parallel to (and indirectly responding to) these reflections on the future of the PRC outside China, the PRC’s political elites and their advisers are engaged with drafting their own development and reform scenarios. The Chinese leaders’ reports to the Party Congress, convening every five years, leave no doubt that the Chinese Communist Party regards its power position as threatened by rising inner-societal tensions between the different socio-economic interest groups that emerged after the official launching of the reform and restructuring of China’s centrally planned, state-owned economy in 1978. The report to the 16th Party Congress in 2002, delivered by the then outgoing CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin, generally stressed the overall success of the party-state’s governance approach but also admitted that not all negative externalities deriving from the restructuring and privatization of the socio-economic systems had been solved. Among the development issues raised were income inequalities, especially with regard to China’s peasants, rising unemployment, the general decline of public order as well as the lack of discipline

³⁶ Heilmann 2008; Shambaugh 2008.

³⁷ On the inevitability of a governance crisis in China, see Pei 2002.

³⁸ For the theoretical elaboration and empirical testing of “resilience”, see Dimitrov 2013; Nathan 2003.

and misbehaviour of individual party cadres.³⁹ The report also states that “the Party’s way of leadership and governance does not yet entirely meet the requirements of the new situation and new tasks. Some Party organizations are feeble and lax.”⁴⁰

While Jiang Zemin’s statement identifies the Party’s responsiveness and ability to adapt its policies to the changing external constellations as the main yardstick against which the system’s performance has to be measured, Hu Jintao’s report to the 17th Party Congress in 2007 – which contains many direct and indirect references to Jiang’s 2002 report (and even *verbatim* repetitions) – instead brings in the aspect of people’s perceptions and belief systems: “While recognizing our achievements, we must be well aware that they still fall short of the *expectations of the people* and that there are still quite a few difficulties and problems on our way forward” (emphasis added).⁴¹ The 2007 report pays special attention to the situation of the Chinese farmers and the new poor in China’s mega-cities. Malfunctioning of party-organizations and individual cadres’ misbehaviour remain on the report’s agenda of issues to be tackled. Whereas the 2002 report speaks of the Party’s “way of leadership and governance”,⁴² the 2007 document updates this point by referring to “the governance capability of the Party”⁴³ – a terminological, conceptual toolkit set up during the Fourth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee in September 2004, which came up with a decision for the “strengthening of the Party’s ruling [or governance] capacities”.⁴⁴

The latest version of the report to the Party Congress – officially delivered in November 2012 by Hu Jintao, but said to contain elements brought up by the then appointed new CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping – once more stresses the need to adapt the Chinese party-state and to respond to the new (material, structural) challenges *and* people’s expectations: “At present, as the global, national and our Party’s conditions continue to undergo profound changes, we are faced with unprecedented opportunities for development as well as risks and challenges unknown before. The whole Party must keep in mind the trust the people have placed in us and the great expectation they have of us.”⁴⁵

³⁹ Jiang Zemin’s report groups these deviations from the party’s code of conduct under the categories “formalism; bureaucratic style of work; falsification; extravagance and waste”, see Jiang 2002.

⁴⁰ Jiang 2002.

⁴¹ Hu 2007.

⁴² Jiang 2002.

⁴³ Hu 2007.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the decisions made by the Fourth Plenum in 2004, see Noesselt 2012: 141–147.

⁴⁵ Hu 2012.

To streamline the ongoing Chinese state-building process, the CCP's Third Plenary Session (2013) came up with a 60 point reform package. This ascribes the market and the private sector a central role for a sustainable and long-term economic development. The privileges of state-owned companies will, at least according to this reform document, be reduced. Economic reforms and the promotion of the private sector, i.e. the outsourcing of duties and responsibilities to (the self-regulating forces of) the market, require a functioning supervision structure and efficient checks-and-balances.⁴⁶ The Fourth Plenary Session (October 2014) was thus dedicated to the issue of how to guarantee and enforce the "rule of law" without destabilizing the party's power monopoly. Directly opposed to the idea of self-cultivation and self-restriction, the idea of setting up new institutions to supervise local cadres and to launch investigations in cases of power abuse and moral misbehaviour reminds one more of Legist than of (Neo-)Confucian thought. In the future, as the decisions of the Fourth Plenum stressed, the promotion and demotion of party cadres will depend on their compliance with and implementation of the rule of law. In addition, the transparency and accountability of the Chinese government should be increased. The plenum also subscribed to the inviolability of the constitution and stressed the importance of a further constitutionalization of Chinese (party) politics.⁴⁷ The party's new emphasis on the rule of law sends the clear signal that the current restructuring of the bureaucratic apparatus is not an attempt to establish any kind of modern "Confucian" order but an eclectic borrowing of successful tools and procedures from other political systems in order to guarantee the functionality of the Chinese one-party system.

In sum, the Fourth Plenum resolutely distances itself from theocratic-nationalist patterns and models its administrative apparatus according to concrete functional demands. Current Chinese political practice thus once more returns to the century-long practiced synthesis of symbolic Confucianism as ideational basis of political legitimacy and Legism as a guide for political practice.⁴⁸

This shift from a primarily, though not exclusively, performance-based legitimization of the CCP's one-party rule to a mode of indirectly responsive governance that reflects people's perceptions and demands was not, as the

⁴⁶ The official Chinese text of the decisions of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee is available at: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/1115/c64094-23559163.html> (10/10/2014).

⁴⁷ For a summary of the core reflections made by the fourth plenum, see: http://news.ifeng.com/a/20141023/42280397_0.shtml (10-24-2014).

⁴⁸ I would like to thank Dieter Senghaas for reminding me of the symbiotic interplay between Confucian and Legist governance traditions in China.

decisions by the Fourth Plenary Session illustrate, triggered by a prior change in the Party's official ideology and terminology. In fact with this strategic move the CCP rather *re*-acted to the anticipated threat of a steering crisis that might, in the long run, also turn into legitimacy crisis and a break-down of the political system as such. Apart from measures to balance and counter the negative externalities of the economic reforms to increase the system's output legitimacy, the CCP also started to re-activate the symbolic dimension of its legitimization strategy. Even though this mechanism of an indirect, pre-emptive inclusion of people's demands – e.g. through a screening of views expressed on Chinese microblogs or an analysis of recent mass movements both in the online and in the offline context of Chinese politics⁴⁹ – adds a new “input” channel to the governance complex of the Chinese party-state, this new mechanism still shows many significant differences from David Easton's famous recursive input-output-model of political legitimacy.⁵⁰ The Chinese model of a more responsive mode of governance relies on informal, indirect input modes. The problem now is that this approach of pre-empting expected public demands might be highly effective in non-pluralist, centrally organized societies. But the formation of new social strata and growing tensions among China's various (socio-economic) interest groups implies that there is no way to come up with a political decision that integrates all these highly diverse and often competing group interests. To stabilize the system and to maintain the CCP's power monopoly, the fourth (and also the fifth) generation of political leaders have returned to a less material justification of the CCP's political rule by moving from the “concrete” output dimension, where legitimacy is bound to quantifiable data, to a more abstract level. This, inspired by the terminology provided by Easton, “diffuse” dimension of political legitimacy is directly linked to people's beliefs and their value-systems: “[a] power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs”.⁵¹

It is more than obvious that the party elites and their advisors are currently refurbishing and reloading the party's ideological toolkit. Given the PRC's decision to further strengthen the role of the market and the spread of capitalism, Marxist ideologems seem more and more inappropriate to serve as ideational reference scheme that guides political practice. Many developmental challenges could be seen – at least from the perspective of an outside observer – as resulting from China's turn from socialism to Manchester-style capitalism in a one-party environment. This could all too easily fuel the perception that the

49 Noesselt 2014.

50 Easton 1965.

51 Beetham 1991: 11.

main ideas of Marxism and its adaptation to the Chinese case by Mao Zedong (and the party theoreticians) are now becoming outdated and unapt to serve as theoretical-ideological blueprint for the Chinese one-party state. As, in the strategic calculation among political practitioners and party theoreticians, any move away from the founding myths of the PRC and the master narrative of the CCP is ascribed the potential of evoking a weakening of the party-state, the official ideological frames are unlikely to be dropped. Instead, as a retrospective comparison of party documents shows, the official political terminology generally survives even fundamental modifications in the party-state's legitimation strategy. It would thus be most appropriate to conceive of CCP "ideology" as a set of select elements – imported from other systems; imported and synthesized with "Chinese" elements; derived from China's historical experiences and its cultural-philosophical heritage. "New" concepts and ideas are presented as logical add-ons, not as independent, innovative ideologems.

Before the background of the ongoing, all-encompassing transformation of the Chinese socio-economic system and the therefrom resulting redefinition of state-society relations, the re-installment of (political) Confucianism by the party reacts to the ideological vacuum that emerged after the shift from the Maoist focus on ideology to a de-politicized pragmatism aiming at economic growth. The party elites are well aware of the spread and diffusion of values and norms other than those represented by the CCP and the formation of social self-help systems with a clear "religious" background – such as Buddhist charity foundations.⁵²

6 Structural Confucianism versus modern Legism

Structural, institutional dimensions of political Confucianism as developed by Jiang Qing⁵³ did so far not make it onto the CCP's official reform agenda. Party Confucianism thus remains limited to the legitimation of political rule on a symbolic, discursive level, whereas structural Confucianism as defined by modern Confucian scholars in China depicts a future developmental trajectory for China that will neither lead to liberal democracy nor stick to the Leninist organization of the centralized CCP party-state.

Referring to the multilevel conceptualization of legitimacy as outlaid in the *Gongyang Commentary* – legitimacy of heaven, legitimacy of earth and legitimacy of the human – Jiang constructs a tripartite cameral system, composed of the House of Confucians, the House of the People and the House of the Nation.

⁵² Laliberté 2011: 113.

⁵³ A collection of Jiang's writings is also available in English, see Jiang, Qing 2013.

The House of Confucians, which embodies the “legitimacy of heaven”, revives the patterns of the imperial “Confucian” bureaucracy. The members of the House of the People, by contrast, would be chosen according to the procedures of “Western” parliamentary democracy. The House of the Nation should, according to Jiang, be headed by a descendant of Confucius who then appoints leading (Confucian) intellectuals to become members of this third house.⁵⁴ This Confucian-theocratic separation of powers has been criticized for being a highly exclusive, elitist organization of “modern” Chinese bureaucracy.⁵⁵ By restricting the right of access to participation to the small group of enlightened Confucian scholars, Jiang Qing directly counters the axiomatic key principles of “Chinese” socialism, which sees the integration of the masses as *conditio sine qua non* for generating legitimacy (in a CCP one-party system). Wang Shaoguang therefore argues that the old threefold conceptualization of legitimacy in Chinese politics would be better represented by the combination of socialism, democracy and Chinese civilization. In this model, socialism stands for the “legitimacy of heaven” or sacred legitimacy, democracy for “legitimacy of the human” or popular legitimacy, and Chinese civilization for the “legitimacy of earth” or historico-cultural legitimacy.⁵⁶

The restructuring of party-state institutions since 2012/2013 obviously follows the latter version of political legitimation. Reference to socialism is still omnipresent in official political debates, while new deliberative “democratic” structures have been established that open new channels for informal feedback. Moreover, the recent re-arrangement of the institutions and ministries of the Chinese party-state, initiated by the Third and Fourth Plenum, aims at strengthening the system’s legitimacy through increasing its output performance, efficiency and transparency.

7 Findings and outlook

Traditional and cultural elements are formative parts of any political system without regard to its internal structure and ideological organization. Reference to traditional thought and cultural heritage is used to generate an inclusive, all-encompassing “national” identity.⁵⁷ Along this line, the CCP’s reference to

⁵⁴ Jiang, Qing 2013: 41.

⁵⁵ Inter alia Bai 2013: 125.

⁵⁶ Wang 2013: 158.

⁵⁷ The space where national identity is created through discursive practices has been typologized by Bell as “mythscape”, which he defines as “the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of peoples’ memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly. The mythscape is the page

“Confucian” terms thus could be interpreted as a response to the observation of a “religious renaissance” and the formation of a new reference system of beliefs and values other than those put forward by Mao-Marxism.⁵⁸

The CCP’s strategy for system consolidation combines techniques of structural inclusion and ideological synchronization. Accompanying the CCP’s transformation from a “revolutionary” into a “ruling” party⁵⁹ and responding to the perceived fragmentation of the post-Maoist Chinese society membership of the CCP has been enlarged to include both (red) capitalists and intellectuals. This also caused a readjustment of the party’s ideological canon that serves as a yardstick against which political positions and actions are measured. “Confucian”-style terms have been added to the party’s repository of political concepts that had so far been dominated by “Marxist” theorems. “Class struggle” frames have been substituted by notions of “harmony”.

Aiming at ideological synchronization by re-activating “ancient” Chinese state philosophy the Chinese party-state masquerades its policy innovations as path-dependent development rooted in “old” practices of governance. As the “Communist Dream” of equality and common wealth seems to have been “postponed” and as contestation processes, fuelled by rising income inequality and perceived socio-economic imbalances, have increased in number, the CCP has jumped on the bandwagon of “religious renaissance”. As any system that bases its legitimacy exclusively on economic performance criteria is highly vulnerable by external shocks and crises,⁶⁰ the current leadership has turned to a more abstract justification of its political rule that includes various religious-philosophical, “ideational” elements.

The above-conducted decryption of Xi Jinping’s political speeches and political campaigns clearly evidences that the symbolic reference frames for streamlining party ideology, especially with regard to cadres’ work style, are not restricted to “Confucian” terms and concepts. The governance ideas put forward by the fourth and fifth generation stand for a highly pragmatic synthesis of governance techniques imported from other political systems or found in the retrospect analysis of China’s own past. Continuity in terms of terminology, including the use of “re-invented” Confucian notions, primarily serves the goal

upon which the multiple and often conflicting nationalist narratives are (re)written; it is the perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past for the purposes of the present”, see Bell 2003: 66.

⁵⁸ On the renaissance of religion in China, see also Madsen 2011 as well as the special issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* on “The State and Religion in China” (40.2, 2011).

⁵⁹ Womack 2005.

⁶⁰ The causal interplay between crises and legitimacy in China has been discussed inter alia by Zhong 1996.

to present China's "new" development path as the only possible trajectory and as a path-dependent process driven by historical patterns and ideational imperatives.

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